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The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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DESIRE AS A STORY FACTOR

AS A basis upon which to build, it will be assumed in this discussion that readers are thoroughly acquainted with the principle laid down many times in *The Student-Writer*, that a plot, broadly speaking, inevitably consists of an obstacle and its overcoming.

The definition, although superficially requiring two elements for the completion of a plot, in reality assumes a triumvirate. The three necessary factors are: First, a strong, moving desire; second, a pronounced obstacle to the attainment of this desire; third, a means of overcoming the obstacle. To make a strong story, it is important that the three factors should be in fairly equal balance.

Imagine an obstacle without a desire and you have an anomaly. It is only when I desire to cross into my neighbor's yard that the fence becomes an obstacle. It is only when I desire to play the violin that my lack of musical skill becomes an obstacle.

In fiction, the first element—the desire—must be worth while, else the reader will not feel that the issue has been sufficiently important to justify the development. In many published stories it is observable that the desire-element is brought to the reader's attention in the opening paragraphs. Take, for instance, this introduction to a story by Frank X. Finnegan:

To some people a hat is merely a head-covering; to others it is a work of art, reverently to be regarded as the sculptured Venus or the painted masterpiece. To still others, including those whose checks enable milliners to make their annual journeys to Paris, a hat may be an abomination of the spirit, a thorn in the flesh, an incitement to profanity—a very banana peel on the threshold of all the virtues. But to Genevieve McNamara a hat—one particular hat of all the creations of straw, ribbon and flowers that were ever twisted together—represented a dream of earthly perfection, unattainable, it might be, but still adorable in its plate-glass shrine.

It dawned upon her enraptured vision one memorable morning about three weeks before Easter Sunday, as she was hastening past Mme. Marie's establishment.

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Here is another example, from a Green Book story by Thomas Gray Fessenden, in which a strong desire is suggested, although left undefined so that the reader may be rendered sufficiently curious to read further:

"I can stand it somehow. I shall have to stand it. It is better this way than—the other— * * *

"Thousands of other men like me are facing this very thing at this very minute. Thousands more will have to face it in the future. So why should I complain or whine? It might have been worse. That other way would have been worse— * * *

Jim Dyer paused to fumble about his desk for a memorandum-slip, and uncovered a yellow envelope, its end ragged where his big fingers had impatiently torn it open. At sight of that envelope he stiffened.

The introduction to Roy P. Churchill's story, "The Hidden Powers of 'E. T.,'" in the January American furnishes a good illustration. Somewhat condensed, it reads:

Ellery Tilford was one of the old-timers on the Sunny Brook car line. He owned his modest home in the Sunny Brook section, and every night, for more than ten years, he had been taking this same two-mile ride.

Epstein & Crane had grudgingly raised him to thirty a week the year before. Then his eyes commenced to trouble him.

"E. T.'s slowin' down," was Epstein's comment to his partner. "If it wasn't for this draft comin' on, we'd can him and look for a younger man."

"Let's try moving him to a better light," suggested the more astute Crane. "He's got a lot more work in him, even if he is past forty a few years; and this'll stop all his notions of getting another raise."

In "Smile, Smile, Smile!" by Catherine Robertson in the January Woman's Home Companion, the appeal of the desire element introduced in the second paragraph needs no pointing out:

"Killed," "Wounded," "Missing," three words that have brought terror and desolation to women's hearts—perhaps the last dread word. "Missing," the most inexpressibly terrible of them all! But the women God bless them! carry on. Not even to their God, when they pray, do they admit that they would have their loved ones in safety at home. They are uplifted by love's great sacrifice, and the only woman in Canada who finds life an ignoble thing, in these days and months and years of war, is she whose man is a slacker.

So, for all the desolation deep in her brave heart, Mary Brown scrubbed the little kitchen floor with a song on her lips.

Two paragraphs, selected from the introduction to "His Father's Keeper," by Clarence B. Kelland, in Collier's for January 11th, clearly introduce the desire upon which the problem is based:

Ted Coredith led a double life and an uncertain life as well. In addition to which he was an intensely practical person. He led the double life from choice, the uncertain life because he was his father's son, and was practical because it was necessary that somebody in the

family should be so. The family consisted of Ted and his father. Ted was eleven years old; his father was a patriarch of thirty-four.

Ted owned one great worry, which was the very apparent fact that his father was handsome, and that young women in all quarters of the world were quick to notice it. Ted's idea of his father was that Mr. Coredith was some sort of bonbon which beautiful young women in all parts of the inhabited earth were striving to gobble. In which he was not widely mistaken.

Occasionally, even a novel will begin with a direct introduction of the desire which furnishes a means for introducing the obstacle. From the opening paragraphs of a novel by E. Phillips Oppenheim, running in the Green Book, we gather these phrases:

Reginald Philip Graham Thursford, Baron Travers, Marquis of Mandelays, issued one May morning from the gloomy precincts of the Law Courts without haste, yet with certain evidences of a definite desire to leave the place behind him. He crossed first the pavement and then the street, piloted here and there by his somewhat obsequious companion, and turned along the Strand westward. Then, in that democratic thoroughfare, for the first time since the calamity had happened, his lips were unlocked in somewhat singular fashion.

"Well, I'm hanged!" he exclaimed with slow and significant emphasis.

His companion glanced furtively in his direction.

"The judge's decision was, without doubt, calamitous," he confessed gloomily.

"You mean to say, then," the Marquis continued, "that for the rest of my days, and in the days of those who may succeed me, that edifice, that cottage which for generations has sheltered one of the family retainers, is to remain the property of—of an alien?"

Who can forget the desires aroused by the picture which introduces the second chapter of Alice Caldwell Hegan's "Mrs. Wiggs of the Cabbage Patch"?

The cold wave that was ushered in that December morning was the beginning of a long series of days that vied with each other as to which could induce the mercury to drop the lowest. The descent of the temperature seemed to have a like effect on the barrel of potatoes and the load of coal in the Wiggses' parlor.

Mrs. Wiggs's untiring efforts to find employment had met with no success, and Jim's exertions were redoubled; day by day his scanty earnings became less sufficient to meet the demands of the family.

On Christmas eve they sat over the stove, after the little ones had gone to bed, and discussed the situation. The wind hurled itself against the house in a very frenzy of rage, shaking the icicles from the window-ledge and hissing through the patched panes. The snow that sifted in through the loose sash lay unmelted on the sill. Jim had a piece of old carpet about him, and coughed with almost every breath. Mrs. Wiggs's head was in her hands, and the tears that trickled through her crooked fingers hissed as they fell on the stove. It was the first time Jim had ever seen her give up.

"Seems like we'll have to ast fer help, Jim," she said. * * *

In each of these examples, the evident purpose of the author has been to create a desire in the reader's mind. It might also be said that a problem has been presented in each example—a problem which presumably will be worked out to a solution. In the first example the problem apparently is, how shall Genevieve secure the coveted hat? In the next, the problem centers around the contents of a yellow envelope which appears to have brought distressing news. The introduction arouses a desire to see a satisfactory working out of the problem.

The "E. T." story naturally suggests the problem which faces a man who is dangerously close to the point of being placed on the retired list. How shall he avoid the fate that apparently threatens him? In our next example, we desire to see the problem that confronts Mary Brown worked out so that she may find either happiness or resignation. In the one following it, we wish to see the anxiety which besets Ted over his father's fate removed.

The Oppenheim introduction, of course, is designed to make the reader hope for a return to the Marquis of his estates. The situation unfolded in the passage from "Mrs. Wiggs" strikes such a human chord of sympathy that both the desire and the problem are obvious.

The desire which an introduction to a story tends to arouse need not necessarily be connected directly with the main theme. Frequently it is only a "teaser" to get the reader interested in the story. But in any event, the main theme itself must inevitably rest upon a desire, whether it is the first desire to be introduced or not.

Practical application of the principle, while not always easy, is at least simple. That is to say, the writer who has made a careful study of fiction should have no difficulty in realizing just what sort of suggestions are needed to arouse a desire in the reader's mind—a desire in sympathy with the characters. The rub, of course, comes in trying to invent similar suggestions for his own stories.

This, however, will not prove so difficult if care is taken to select ideas which have a strong *problem* possibility. By merely stating a problem, we naturally arouse in the reader a desire that it may be solved, and this desire can be augmented by subtle appeals to the reader's patriotism, sentiment, romantic spirit, or other emotion.

Thus, I may create a problem which consists in trying to discover who committed a certain crime. The mystery inherently arouses a certain amount of desire on the part of the reader. But that desire may be augmented if I succeed in making the reader take a deep personal interest in one or more of the characters under

suspicion. Desire to see him cleared will be added to the desire for a solution of the problem.

Patriotic desire might also be infused into the situation by causing the mystery to revolve around some sort of a spy plot or conspiracy against the government. The more powerfully the desire is thus reinforced, the more tense and appealing will be the story.

W. E. H.

NOVELTY IN POETIC DICTION

By EUGENE PARSONS

SURPRISE cuts as much figure in poetry as in fiction. Novelty in poetic diction is a factor that counts in a lyric or a piece of blank verse. Only a single phase of this large subject is considered in this article, which deals concisely with Tennyson's dainty perfection in phrasing, his success in attaining "a glory of words," also in avoiding hackneyed expressions.

Of course, the aim of a writer is to make an impression, to rivet attention. This he does by his choice of words. While he may not be consciously seeking after novelty, he knows he must not be tame. The bard who is ambitious of winning unassailable renown realizes that bold, striking imagery captivates. Half the battle with the poetic artist is to know how to use poetical words and to shun prosaic terms. In a word, he must be something of a stylist, a phrase-maker who knows the difference between prose and poetry.

Pope was on his guard against commonplace rimes, and Tennyson put in much time seeking words that would not be repetitions of everyday phraseology. The great Victorian laureate had a large vocabulary. He had ranged far and wide in the fields of literature, ancient and modern, and he had dipped into some medieval writers. He was a gleaner; he was always on the lookout for adjectives and other words that would serve his purpose in dressing up his thoughts attractively. Thus he added to the armory of speech, making many old words current coin. Even in the midcentury, Tennysonian phrases were widely quoted, being expressive and felicitous. He rendered humanity an inestimable service by clothing commonplaces in the best language; he had the skill of a master in putting things tersely and happily. This is no slight achievement.

The state of mind which Tennyson's poems induce is one of admiration at the discovery of innumerable beauties. The reader continually feels like exclaiming, "How fine! how artistic!" Tennyson is an expert in "fitting aptest words to things." His diction is nothing less than a triumph of culture and ingenuity. His language is remarkable for purity, brilliancy, and especially for the abundance of short Saxon words.

In his young manhood Tennyson was a great wanderer. He made frequent tours on foot through the British Isles, and occasionally visited the countries of Europe. He made good use of his observations, jotting

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down in prose on the spot—just as Byron did on his pilgrimage—what he gazed upon and heard. He was in the habit of sketching in neat phrases what he saw in his travels that was particularly striking—to quote his own statement, “of chronicling in four or five words or more whatever might strike me as picturesque in Nature.”

Here we have the secret, or part of it, of Tennyson's skill as a phrase-maker, also of what made him a consummate colorist. For the local setting of “The Lotos-Eaters” he utilized material gathered when on a journey to the Pyrenees in 1830. The famed bugle-echoes that he heard on the lakes of Killarney, in 1848, inspired the incomparable bugle-song in “The Princess,” with its graphic touches and onomatopoeic suggestions. Byron succeeded admirably in his descriptions, but he was hardly equal to Tennyson as a word-painter.

Tennyson's superiority in what may be called his instinct for style is his chief advantage over Byron, whose verse is at times harsh and slovenly. Byron's rendering of the well-known passage in Dante's “Inferno,” Canto V—

The greatest of all woes
Is to remind us of our happy days
In misery, and that thy teacher knows—

falls distinctly below Tennyson's superb line in “Locksley Hall”:

This is truth the poet sings,

That a sorrow's crown of sorrow is remembering happier things.

Here is the supreme felicity of literary art, which makes Tennyson easily the “first and greatest of workers in verbal mosaic.”

No man ever lavished more painstaking effort in the revision of his poems than did Alfred Tennyson. He wrote and rewrote, polishing his phrases, changing the form and the substance of his lyrics and his pieces in blank verse. He understood better than did any of his contemporaries, except Matthew Arnold, the art of omitting the superfluous, “the purging and subliming of what he had already done,” to quote Fitzgerald's words. An instance may be given. The first line of that wonderful lyric, “Tears, idle tears,” originally stood:

Ah, foolish tears, I know not what they mean.

The hand of the artist made a happy change to

Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean.

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Once in conversation Tennyson was asked if he corrected his poems much. He answered: "Yes; and I find that in the case of almost every correction I have substituted a Saxon for a Latin word."

Tennyson was at home in the realm of beauty. His art is studied, and yet he often achieves the highest art, which "consists in a careless-ordered appearance of neglecting it." Some of his pithy, exquisitely worded phrases may be quoted: "the larger hope," "across the storm," "one increasing purpose," "sweet girl graduates," "claims of long descent," "the Parliament of man," "the fairy tales of science," "the long result of Time," "the heir of all the ages," "one far-off divine event," "the crowning race of humankind," "the wise indifference of the wise," "to fool the crowd with glorious lies," "the spacious times of great Elizabeth," "dear as remember'd kisses after death," "the grand old name of gentleman." These are only a few of his terse expressions that are

Jewels five-words-long
That on the stretch'd forefinger of all Time
Sparkle forever.

Every age must have its poets, the men and women who express themselves in verse and reflect the spirit of the time.

Song is the potion,
All things renewing.

That poet is popular and influential who has a large mental horizon and displays careful workmanship, shaping phrases in which the reader delightfully discovers "an unexpected splendor." Of course, there are other factors besides poetic art that figure in the making of a bard; he must have a fund of practical wisdom, beauty and nobleness of nature and steadfast perseverance along with other characteristics of greatness. At the same time, the ambitious minstrel should remember that diction is not a negligible element.

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